

UNSW Submission – Building Asia capability in Australia through the education system and beyond

Executive Summary

UNSW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into building Asia capability in Australia through the education system and beyond. Australia's universities play an important role in building capability through the teaching of Asian languages and cultural literacy, as well as through engagement with the region.

UNSW's submission presents input on the key areas of consideration, as well as recommendations to address barriers and build Asia capability in Australia.

Recommendations:

1. **Support transformational uplift in mobility (study tours, summer schools, exchange programs) to and from Asia for students, staff and entrepreneurs, creating an Australia-Asia Education and Innovation Bridge for the long-term. Ensure conducive visa frameworks.**
2. **Rebuild Asia capability by reinvesting in Asian languages and cultural education, and by supporting engagement with Asia both within and beyond the education sector. This will contribute to learning continuity, future workforce readiness, trust-building capacity and lasting literacy.**
3. **Improve resourcing for qualified teachers and curriculum support across the education sector.**
4. **Consider incentive schemes for students to study Asian languages and cultural studies.**
5. **Recognising the vital contribution of Asia capability to diplomacy, trade, and business in Asia, support university programs that aim to reverse the decline in Asian language and cultural studies, and link programs to employability and skills priorities. This could include supporting opportunities to embed Asia cultural competence and literacy into university courses other than purely language and cultural studies courses.**
6. **Encourage partnerships between universities in Australia and Asia, enabling joint research, learning and teaching.**
7. **Support opportunities for overseas electives and exchanges. Investigate technology solutions to support virtual exchange opportunities.**
8. **Strengthen whole-of-government coordination and collaboration, including strengthening collation of data on Asian language use and study to better inform decision-making.**
 - a. **Publish an annual report on participation levels across primary, secondary and tertiary education, as well as provide collated data on use of Asian languages in Australian households.**

Introduction

Developing Asia capability in Australia needs coordinated policies that address systemic barriers. Universities play a critical enabling role, but efforts are constrained by weaknesses elsewhere in the education system – particularly the decline of Asian language programs in schools, with lower numbers of students interested in pursuing university-level language and cultural studies. Migration is a significant structural enabler, providing a base of skills that could be leveraged. Mobility is vital to improve Asia capability for students, citizens, entrepreneurs and policy-makers.

Good practice models demonstrate that Asia capability can be built through immersive, interdisciplinary and supported learning.

At UNSW, Asia capability is supported through language studies, and courses that study the region from various disciplinary perspectives, such as politics, society and culture, environment, law and business. These courses offer a foundational context for students to better understand Australia's relationship with the region and develop Asia capability for the next generation of leaders.

Embedding this competence into Australia's overall Asia capability requires structured reciprocal exchange ('mobility') at significant scale over the long term, explicitly supported and incentivised by Government policy across a range of departments and agencies. Reciprocal exchange pathways must be built for school students, university students, and entrepreneurs, and crucially also for policy-makers.

The benefits of learning (Asian) languages

Universities have an important role in developing Australia's Asia capability. Providing language courses is a vital component of building Asia capability.

Students who learn a language have improved communication skills. The conversational nature of language-learning involves the everyday practice of perspective taking and of holding multiple perspectives in mind while communicating one's own. Students must achieve an outcome with limited resources (for example, conveying a complex idea with limited vocabulary), a process refined and improved as competency and confidence increases. Learning a language cultivates practical empathy and significant problem-solving skills that are valued by employers. The ability to speak a language is often valued by employers looking to attract talent in a competitive global market.

Intercultural understanding is a central component of language courses as well as courses in Asian History and Philosophy. Intercultural understanding encourages understanding histories, cultivating empathy and perspective-taking. Language courses also teach students about differences within a country relating to class, religion, gender, geography – developing a broader understanding of Asia than just language.



Current state of Asian language learning and Asian cultural studies in schools, universities and the community, and strategies to stimulate demand and improve access

Notwithstanding the advantages language study can bestow, there has been a significant decline in domestic enrolments in Asian language study, including a notable decline in Indonesian language enrolments nationally.

The medium-term trend of decline in language study is occurring in many English-speaking countries. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority¹ compiles statistics on Year 12 language enrolments in Australia. It shows that Indonesian enrolments have fallen by more than 50 per cent (from 1,161 students in 2010 to 542 students in 2023). The largest decline is in students learning Chinese (from a peak of more than 5,000 per year in 2018, to just over 3,000 per year in 2023). Japanese overtook French in 2015 as the most popular language taught in schools, but it too has suffered a decline of around 20 per cent in the past decade. These changes have an impact on the pipeline of students who then go on to study languages at university – including as part of a teaching qualification.

At UNSW, overall demand for languages has declined. Demand for Chinese language courses has fallen by 58 per cent since 2018, and enrolments for Japanese language courses have fallen by 19 per cent.

Although the overall demand for language studies at UNSW has declined, there is still student demand for studying Asian languages such as Chinese, Japanese and Korean as part of a dual degree (minor or major in an Asian language). Of students taking a dual degree involving Business, 57 per cent completed a language specialism, with 83 per cent of those students taking an Asian language: Chinese (42 per cent), Japanese (28 per cent), or Korean (13 per cent). In Engineering, amongst students who did a dual degree, 62 per cent completed a language specialism, and 62 per cent of those were in Asian Languages: Japanese (30 per cent), Chinese (25 per cent) and Korean (7 per cent). These numbers suggest that students regard expertise in an Asian language as an important part of their training in business and engineering.

Strategies to improve enrolments in Asian languages at UNSW emphasise employability as a key outcome of language learning, noting the benefits of learning a language noted above.

In terms of improving access, classes are being offered online and during evenings, while the curriculum has been upgraded to include more flexible, online and interactive elements which feedback suggests students appreciate.

Strategies to stimulate demand must bear in mind that some students take a language out of pure curiosity and some take it for practical use as part of an applied degree. Higher-level language courses involve critical appreciation of literature, and the development of advanced interpretation and evaluation skills which are essential components of successful people in every sector. However, language learning at all levels is also an applied subject, with a focus on technical accuracy and on outcomes – and as such, it shares much with Engineering, Business or Science.

Opportunities to develop and promote the value of Asian cultural literacy, intercultural understanding and Asian diplomacy skills outside of language learning, and good practice models for building Asia capability

¹ <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/year-12-subject-enrolments>



All UNSW faculties have a role to play in enhancing Asia capability. From Business to Law to Education, many degrees offer the potential to mainstream the study of Asia in curriculum. One example is Australian law schools, which have a long and proud history of teaching, research and engagement in Asian law. The continuation of such curriculum in disciplines such as law is not common and depends on the support of faculty leadership and on student interest and enrolments.

A successful model to generate interest in and build Asia capability at universities is immersive overseas elective offerings. In-country study programs are critically important for developing reciprocal trust, cross-cultural awareness and mutual respect, language skills and Asia literacy.

UNSW's Faculty of Law & Justice has a suite of overseas electives, in which students undertake two-week intensive courses overseas. For an overseas elective on gender and the law that takes place in India, we mix Australian university students with students at the local university partner, creating an opportunity to learn together about the region and its social, political and legal operation. This results in increased cultural literacy and intercultural understanding – and it also builds relationships that contribute to deep trust for the long term. This year, Law & Justice offered an intercultural legal dialogue series to address the gap between Asia capability in the law school, and the expertise of our PhD candidates who are academics from Asia. The series aimed to enhance collective skills in intercultural dialogue.

Embedding Asian case studies in courses demonstrates the practical application of disciplinary approaches. In practice, Asia-related case studies can be embedded across all study programs to boost students' Asia capability, particularly in relation to Australia-Asia relations and issues of global concern.

Government schemes that promote research collaboration with partners in Asia foster intercultural engagement and understanding. Programs such as the Global Science and Diplomacy Fund funded through the Department of Industry, Science and Resources (DISER) and funding through specific DFAT initiatives such as the ASEAN-Australia Centre grants encourage Asia-related research. However, these programs are extremely competitive and often over-subscribed. The most effective way to encourage more research collaboration between Australian universities and their Asian counterparts is for further government funding to support these initiatives.

Structural enablers and barriers to developing Asia capability

UNSW builds Asia capability by emphasising the importance of language and Asia literacy, offering language courses, embedding Asian content and case studies in programs across faculties, collaborative research with Asian partners and in-country experiences for students.

However, universities exist in an eco-system in which they are dependent on other areas of the education sector such as high school language programs and on policy, industry and commerce.

The barriers to developing Asia capability include a decline in Asian language programs in primary and high schools which in turns leads to a shrinking pipeline of students seeking to advance their Asia language skills at universities. This has led to closure of language programs at some universities over recent years which are no longer financially viable. The Asian Studies Association of Australia reports on the challenges of research and teaching at universities in Australia². Their latest report notes many barriers to further develop Asia capability, and highlights the state of language teaching and learning,

² Aspinall, E & Crouch, M, 2023, Australia's Asia Education Imperative: Trends in the Study of Asia and Pathways for Reform, Asian Studies Association of Australia, Canberra, Australia. <http://doi.org/10.26190/ha4q-dm52>



challenges at universities, the lack of national strategy, and changing policy frameworks and priorities; as well as examples of university study abroad and engagement programs with Asia.

Migration is a significant enabler of Asia capability. Children of migrants often have language skills that can then be built upon to develop bilingual fluency. They usually have an understanding of cultural mores, linguistic idioms, geography and history, which can be the basis for further learning and engagement. The curiosity and enthusiasm showed by these individuals often spreads to the wider population, which can act as entry points for deeper, more sustained engagement with Asia, its cultures and languages, amongst those without any family ties to Asia.

Expectations for whole-of-government coordination and collaboration

A long-term whole-of-government approach is necessary to reduce the decline in Asia capability in Australia. It needs to begin with data sharing so we can better identify both the real areas of decline, as well as areas where incentives have been created that work to encourage students to take up the study of Asian languages and cultural studies (such as adjustments for school students if they take an Asian language).

We recommend that a data repository to oversee collection of data on Asia capability and report on language and Asian studies participation across the education system should be established. This should also include other relevant data on languages. Improving data collection and access to quality data will help coordinated effort and assist with decision making across a whole of government grouping.

Coordinated and sustainable national change will require Federal and State education departments working with education stakeholders across the region. For example, the New Colombo Plan, under the remit of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, must include education providers and better connection with state education departments.

In-country study programs are crucial. Government support for in-country study, such as the New Colombo Plan, is crucial for supporting Australia's Asia capability amongst secondary and tertiary students. We congratulate the Government on their efforts thus far to facilitate university student mobility to Asian countries. However, the funding available is not equal to the scale of a truly ambitious Asia literacy program that requires significant movements of peoples in both directions. Noting the significant pipeline issue of declining numbers of secondary students taking languages, consideration must also be given to increasing access to overseas study and intercultural opportunities for school students in the public system. The facilitating role of universities should be recognised and accounted for in grant schemes, through funding that supports the time and administrative efforts required to ensure successful student participation.

Greater government funding through mechanisms such as the Global Science and Diplomacy Fund, and an equivalent for non-science related research and bilateral country or regional research funding, would foster collaboration and cross-cultural learning. This could be leveraged through most if not all existing government grant schemes for which universities are eligible. Incentives for equivalent secondary education sector support, including teacher training and upskilling, university collaboration, and student cross-curriculum exchange experiences, could be included in national priorities under the School Reform Agreements, with additional support from state Investment portfolios.

Conclusion

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